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UNCLAS BRUSSELS 000108

SIPDIS

OES/S NANCY CARTER-FOSTER

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TAGS: BE ECON EU SOCI UNDP UNGA

SUBJECT: BELGIUM: DESTRACTED DRIVING DEMARCHE DELIVERED

REF: STATE 6703

¶1. (U) Summary: The law in Belgium regarding text messaging, or any cellular phone use while driving, is very clear: no driver may use a mobile phone while holding it in his or her hand unless the car is stopped. This legislation was enacted in 2000; however, despite the longstanding law, many Belgians continue to use their cell phones regularly while driving. Reports show that approximately one half of all drivers sometimes use their cell phones behind the wheel and that each year approximately 70,000 drivers are ticketed in Belgium for using their cell phones. Aside from ticketing, Belgium is taking action through awareness campaigns to confront the issue of distracted driving. End summary.

¶2. (U) The law in Belgium states that a driver may not use a mobile phone in his hands. Thus, any action in which a driver would have to hold his phone, including text-messaging, is prohibited. This law was passed July 1, 2000, and that same year in December, the Belgian Institute for Road Safety (IBSR) conducted an awareness study about the new legislation. This study found that nearly all drivers who owned a cell phone (96 percent) were aware of the new law, and proposed the use of hands-free kits as a way to reduce the risk of distracted driving. However, in 2009, the IBSR changed its position on hands-free devices. The institute now claims that while these devices reduce the overall distraction of cell phone use, they still create a significant distraction for drivers, therefore advocating that drivers should avoid using even their hands-free devices while driving.

¶3. (U) The IBSR based this information on a recent study from Belgium's Catholic University of Leuven. This study revealed that having a cell phone in hand increases the risk of an accident by 75 percent, and by 24 percent with a hands-free kit. The IBSR also points out that drivers using their cell phones do not see four out of ten road signs, refuse the right of way one out of four times when they should not, and take longer to react (0.3 to 0.7 seconds longer than average). The study concluded that one out of two drivers continues to use a cell phone behind the wheel.

¶4. (U) At the request of the Belgian State Secretary of Mobility, Etienne Schoupe, the IBSR along with a private insurance company, AXA Banque & Assurance, conducted a study of bad driving practices in 2009. The results of the AXA awareness study showed that, after tailgating, Belgians believe that using one's cell phone while driving without a hands-free kit is the second most hazardous bad driving practice. About 85 percent of those surveyed responded this way, although, 32 percent admitted to sometimes using their cell phones without a hands-free device. State Secretary Schoupe has warned that it is not worth the risk. Despite such warnings, 70,000 drivers are ticketed for cell phone use each year in Belgium*an infraction that carries a 100 euro (approximately USD 142) fine.

GUTMAN